

Becoming Utopia:

Lee Wen's *Journey of a Yellow Man No.1*

By Velda Phua

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In 1992, the Yellow Man made his first appearance to the world at the City of London Polytechnic, in London, United Kingdom. Stripped down to his briefs, the Yellow Man's nakedness nevertheless came secondary to the bright, garish yellow covering his body (fig. 1). The crowd stood still as he began to handle a set of thick red chains, wrapping them around his neck and body before pulling them apart, freeing himself from the self-inflicted entrapment (fig. 2). Repeating these motions, the weighted chains seemed to vacillate between a torturous prison and a sensual embrace as Lee combined gestures of struggle and intimacy, hands pulling the chains away from his neck only to press them to his cheek, desire and distress intermingling, yellow body in flux (fig. 3). The performance transformed into an oscillation between pain and pleasure: it was ambiguous if he was grappling with the bondage or submitting himself to the intimate entanglement. This set of actions 'repeatedly mimicked the poles of restraint and release'¹ as Lee remained transfixed on the ritualistic repetition of the motions. Lee performed these gestures within a singular section of the room, on one side of the wall divider that stood in the middle of the circular space the crowd had gathered around. After eight minutes of the aforementioned spectacle, he broke his foetal position (fig. 4) and rose from the ground, a chain in each hand. The fixedness of his position made his next action notable: he proceeded to drag the chains on the floor as he walked around the wall divider, footsteps tracing a circular path before arriving at where he had initially departed. Lee then set the pair of chains on the ground, lining them up in a parallel relation that seemed to suggest a path, ladder, bridge, or any similar transitory space (fig. 5). Gathering

¹ Ashleigh Chow. "Of 'Yellow': Performing Orientalisms and Cultural Hybridity in Lee Wen's 'Journey of a Yellow Man No. 1.'" *Columbia Undergraduate Journal of Art History*, (2021): 40-59. Accessed April 14, 2024. https://www.linkedin.com/posts/ashleigh-chow-yl_of-yellow-activity-6798863351289147392-K4xM/.

a handful of solid fuel, he lit one and placed it down before him for every step taken backwards through the space between the chains. Exiting the chain-path, he sank to his knees in a position reminiscent of a Chinese kowtow (fig. 6). He continued on to light candles in a large circle in a similar motion to before, leaving enough space for his outstretched body to lay within after he finished establishing the ring of light. Therein, he lay down on his back, arms above his head, before he began to ‘spin laterally’ in a fashion that calls to mind a sacrificial offering or the way clock hands move (fig. 7). Titled *Journey of a Yellow Man No.1*, this concluded the first performance of the *Journey of a Yellow Man* series by Singaporean artist Lee Wen, a concatenation of events that would eventually come to consume two decades of his artistic career.

Preceding the performance by three decades was Michel Foucault’s essay ‘Utopian Bodies’, first published in 1966. In it he outlines a series of ideas problematising the utopia/body binary, producing and assessing the terrains of the counter-intuitive utopian body. To begin familiarising ourselves with Foucault’s thinking on utopia, it would be helpful to understand how the word itself came to be. The word ‘utopia’ is derived from two Greek words: οὐ (“not”) and τόπος (“place”), meaning “no-place”. The word was first coined in the book *Utopia* (1516) by Sir Thomas More. Foucault thus derives his definition of utopias from its particular etymology, stating them as “sites with no real place.”²

Utopia is a place outside all places, but it is a place where I will have a body without body, a body that will be beautiful, limpid, transparent, lumi-nous, speedy, colossal in its power, infinite in its duration.³

Because utopias are ‘no-place’, Foucault begins ‘Utopian Bodies’ with the position that the ‘body’ is ‘the opposite of utopia’: it is the ‘pitiless place’, ‘absolute place’ that ‘is never under different skies’.⁴ He

² Michel Foucault, trans. Jay Miskowiec. “Of Other Spaces.” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648>.

³ Michel Foucault, “Utopian Body,” in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2006), 229-234: 229.

⁴ Foucault, 229.

laments that ‘under this skin [he] will have to rot’, that the ‘body is the place without recourse to which [he] is condemned’.⁵ Utopia, in his terms, is thus that of ‘an incorporeal body.’⁶ He goes on to list examples of utopias made for ‘eras[ing] the sad topology of the body’: the soul, the tombs, the genies and the fairies that make the body ‘disappear’.⁷ However, he counters this initial conclusion with the claim that the body is in fact ‘not [...] so easily reduced’.⁸ In fact, utopias are ‘born from the body itself’.⁹ The body is no longer a ‘cage’¹⁰, it is an ‘incomprehensible body, penetrable and opaque body, open and closed body, utopian body’.¹¹ While it may be ‘absolutely visible’¹², it is simultaneously invisible. He raises the example of the skull, the back and the shoulder, which he can feel but not see. This body is thus described as both real and unreal space, fluctuating between ‘light, imponderable’ and ‘fantastic and ruminated architecture’¹³. It is no longer anti-utopian, for the body itself is ‘always elsewhere’, ‘tied to all the elsewheres of the world’, ‘elsewhere than in the world, because it is around it that things are arranged’.¹⁴ Foucault concludes that ‘the body is the zero point of the world’, where ‘all possible places, real or utopian, emerge and radiate.’¹⁵

This paper posits the productive interweaving of Lee Wen’s seminal work with Foucault’s lines of thought. If the body is both an inescapable site as well as an open and penetrable body, Lee Wen’s work can be read as a personal response to this ontological and existential condition.¹⁶ I suggest, then, a tracing of how Lee’s work manages to manifest utopic potentials through Foucauldian thought of body transfigurations and self-elimination.

⁵ Foucault, 229.

⁶ Foucault, 229.

⁷ Foucault, 230.

⁸ Foucault, 230.

⁹ Foucault, 231.

¹⁰ Foucault, 229.

¹¹ Michel Foucault. “Utopian Body,” in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2006), 229-234: 231.

¹² Foucault, 231.

¹³ Foucault, 231.

¹⁴ Foucault, 233.

¹⁵ Foucault, 233.

¹⁶ Martijn Johan Loos, Johanna Kaszti, and Rick Van Der Waarden, “The Body as Heterotopia,” *Junctions* 5, no. 2 (August 5, 2021): 18, <https://doi.org/10.33391/jgjh.99>.

Becoming yellow

I'm already yellow. Why do I still paint myself yellow?

—Lee Wen¹⁷

At the centre of Lee's performance series spanning from 1992 to 2012 is the Yellow Man. The colour yellow marks the body explicitly, rendering it as disjointed from the world around it while its public traversal gives birth to a mitigation of new relations. To understand this work as both a 'personal' and 'political affront'¹⁸, it is key that we understand the context in which the Yellow Man was born. As Alice Ming Wai Jim writes: 'At the intersection of Asian art history, critical race theory, and migration and diasporic studies, one is never far (enough away) from the chromatic framing of race and ethnicity: yellow race, yellow peril, yellow face, the forever foreigner. Born in 1957 in colonial Singapore and having grown up in the postcolonial republic, Lee Wen is no stranger to his persona's explicit, racially marked body.'¹⁹ Lee's 'yellowness' is made the centrepiece of this series exactly because it is deeply troubled. His body is 'racially marked' by a multitude of forces. Firstly, Singapore employs a strict CMIO (Chinese Malay Indian Others) racial categorisation as main driver behind its multicultural policies that are 'based on a vision of coexisting identities [...] because of their migratory histories'²⁰. Therefore, every Singaporean citizen has to legally identify with one of the four ethnic groups. Singaporeans are born into a world where 'race-based classifications are inextricably tied to the social fabric', culminating in Singapore's socio-spatial constructions, i.e. racialised regions like Little India, Chinatown, Haji Lane; or the Housing Development Board (HDB) complex, where ethnic groups are

¹⁷ Wen Lee. "Journey of a Yellow Man No.5: Index to Freedoms", artist statement for 4th Asian Art Show, Fukuoka Art Museum, 10 October 1994.

¹⁸ Alice Ming Wai Jim, "Lee Wen: Performing Yellow," *Afterall* 46 (September 1, 2018): 4–13: 4. <https://doi.org/10.1086/700243>.

¹⁹ Ming, 4.

²⁰ Ashleigh Chow. "Of "Yellow": Performing Orientalisms and Cultural Hybridity in Lee Wen's "Journey of a Yellow Man No. 1." *Columbia Undergraduate Journal of Art History*, (2021): 40-59. Accessed April 14, 2024. https://www.linkedin.com/posts/ashleigh-chow-yl_of-yellow-activity-6798863351289147392-K4xM/.

granted state-subsidised housing in specific government-designated ratios²¹ to ‘preserve Singapore’s multi-cultural identity and promote racial integration and harmony.’²² Secondly, Lee is a member of the Chinese diaspora, specifically the 南洋 Nanyang (“South Seas”) diaspora, a term for the Chinese community who emigrated down to South East Asia during late 19th to early 20th centuries. His father ‘was an author who wrote in Chinese’, while Lee described himself in an interview as ‘a child of the post-colonial country of Singapore’ who ‘[found himself] embarrassingly not able to use Chinese language very well’²³. Lee describes in his accompanying essay that the ‘yellow pigment on [his] yellow skin was an emphasis on [his] ethnicity’, and how ‘meeting many Chinese people from different countries and cultural background’ elucidated his ‘uniquely Singaporean’ ‘characteristics and attitudes’²⁴. Furthermore, yellow has heavy associations to the ancestral home: The 黄河 (huáng hé), or the Yellow River in China is regarded by scholars as a cradle of civilization²⁵, symbolising ‘the Chinese spirit: bearing burdens (its sedimentation), adaptation (its course changes), and perseverance (its continual flow)’²⁶. In ancient China, yellow was reserved for the imperial family, representing the sun and gold. Thirdly, Lee’s work was birthed specifically during his time in London, Singapore’s ex-colonial master, where a new, othering gaze was exerted upon his body. Lee’s arrival in London was preceded by Rasheed Araeen’s 1989-90 exhibition at the Hayward Gallery: titled ‘The Other Story’, the exhibition presented work from artists who were ‘living in a country which [was] not their own’, emphasising issues of postcolonial struggle, diaspora, cultural exchanges and complex relationships to

²¹“HDB Ethnic Integration Policy (1989),” n.d., <https://www.sg101.gov.sg/social-national-identity/examples/hdb/>. (“The policy stipulated that the ratio of flats within neighbourhoods for the different ethnic groups: 22 per cent for Malays, 84 per cent for Chinese, and 10 per cent for Indians and other minority groups. Within each block, the ratio for flats was 25 per cent for Malays, 87 per cent for Chinese, and 13 per cent for Indians. These quotas have changed over the years, such as in 2010, where the neighbourhood- and block-level limits for Indians and other minority groups were raised to 12 per cent and 15 per cent respectively. Nonetheless, the principles remain the same.”)

²² “HDB | Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) and Singapore Permanent Resident (SPR) Quota,” n.d., <https://www.hdb.gov.sg/cs/infoweb/residential/buying-a-flat/buying-procedure-for-resale-flats/plan-source-and-contract/planning-considerations/eip-spr-quota>.

²³ “Interview With Lee Wen,” The Artling, May 13, 2014, <https://theartling.com/en/artzine/interview-lee-wen-performance-artist/>.

²⁴ Wen Lee, “Journey of a Yellow Man No. 1” artist statement for City Polytechnic, London, 1992.

²⁵ Wikipedia contributors, “Yellow River,” Wikipedia, April 13, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_River.

²⁶ Candice Song, “Yellow River: Facts, Location, Geography, Scenery,” China Highlights - Since 1998!, April 9, 2024, <https://www.chinahighlights.com/yellowriver/>.

the Britain empire.²⁷ The exhibition was met with heated criticism, reflecting the sociopolitical climate of the art world at the time. The ‘archetypal character’ of the Yellow Man ‘investigated Lee’s experience of yellow peril’²⁸ and ‘his own ambivalent position as a postcolonial subject in a putatively ‘multicultural metropolis’, acting as an embodiment of a ‘living caricature of the hyper-racialised subject’.²⁹ Tracing the history of the Yellow Man leads us to the *Systema naturae* (1735) of eighteenth century Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, wherein he proposed his theory of race-based classifications: Homo Asiaticus’ were ‘yellowish, melancholy, endowed with black hair and brown eyes... severe, conceited, and stingy’.³⁰ This, alongside other racial theories in its succession, ‘laid the spurious foundations for scientific racism used to justify colonisation, slavery and dispossession of non-Europeans and indigenous peoples, their lands and waters’³¹.

Having established the layers of yellowness that Lee had come to face, his decision to embody this particular colour and mark himself as the Yellow Man seems counter-intuitive, and at worst, counter-productive. His decision could be seen as ‘risk[ing] the reframing of himself into the very category that he rejects’³², propagating Foucault’s description of a ‘condemn[ing]’ to the ‘body as cage’.³³ However, Lee’s intentional yellowing of his body could be read through the Foucauldian lens as acknowledging these layers of yellowness, opening his body-site up as a utopian vessel that embodied

²⁷ Michelle Reeves and Anandie Ramamurthy, “The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain,” Press release, 1989, accessed April 15, 2024, <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/the-other-story-afro-asian-artists-in-post-war-britain-hayward-gallery/DAWhyZvGtKdOKA?hl=en>.

²⁸ Ashleigh Chow. “Of “Yellow”: Performing Orientalisms and Cultural Hybridity in Lee Wen’s “Journey of a Yellow Man No. 1.” *Columbia Undergraduate Journal of Art History*, (2021): 40-59. Accessed April 14, 2024. https://www.linkedin.com/posts/ashleigh-chow-yl_of-yellow-activity-6798863351289147392-K4xM/.

²⁹ Wenny Teo. “The Long Journey of a ‘Yellow Man’: Remembering Lee Wen (1957-2019),” *Frieze*, April 24, 2019, <https://www.frieze.com/article/long-journey-yellow-man-remembering-lee-wen-1957-2019>.

³⁰ Gregor Benton and E. Gomez, *The Chinese in Britain, 1800-Present: Economy, Transnationalism, Identity* (Palgrave MacMillan Transnation, 2008).

³¹ Alice Ming Wai Jim, “Lee Wen: Performing Yellow,” *Afterall* 46 (September 1, 2018): 4–13: 4. <https://doi.org/10.1086/700243>.

³² Ashleigh Chow. “Of “Yellow”: Performing Orientalisms and Cultural Hybridity in Lee Wen’s “Journey of a Yellow Man No. 1.” *Columbia Undergraduate Journal of Art History*, (2021): 40-59. Accessed April 14, 2024. https://www.linkedin.com/posts/ashleigh-chow-yl_of-yellow-activity-6798863351289147392-K4xM/.

³³ Michel Foucault. “Utopian Body,” in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2006), 229-234: 229.

the different spatio-temporalities that his marked body carried. As Foucault writes: ‘The mask, the tattoo, the make-up: they place the body into another space. They usher it into a place that does not take place in the world directly.’³⁴ The act of painting himself yellow does not lock him into a ‘pitiless place’; in fact, the effect of the Yellow Man as a site of utopian potential begins to unravel not just in its lurid yellowness but in Lee’s act of body transfiguration. The Yellow Man is at once ‘penetrable and opaque’: his unignorable hue and deliberate out-of-placeness forces him and the viewer into a complex relationship where gazes bounce off each other in a dance of self-and-other consciousness. His corporeal body is simultaneously incorporeal.

Yellow pigment on my yellow skin was an emphasis on my ethnicity. While living in London and meeting many Chinese people from different countries and cultural backgrounds, I found that many of my characteristics and attitudes were uniquely Singaporean. Therefore I wanted to elevate the symbolism of yellow to that of the colour of the sun or that of gold. If symbols were still necessary in art today, let them be of universal appeal, going beyond ethnicity. The sun and gold have often had associations with energy, nobility and spirituality. My wish was to perhaps give the hope that man can manifest these qualities.³⁵

In his essay written for *Journey of a Yellow Man No. 1*, Lee suggests a multitude of ‘imaginary space[s]’ might ‘blossom’ in the body-site through embodying Yellow, echoing the sentiment that Foucault expresses of his body being ‘like the City of the Sun’. Although the body has ‘no place’, it is the ‘zero point’ where ‘all possible places, real or utopian, emerge and radiate’. The Yellow Man does not care about ‘acquir[ing] another body [that is] more beautiful, better decorated, more easily recognisable’: he wishes to ‘place the body in communication with secret powers and invisible forces’ and into ‘another space [...] that does not take place in the world directly’. This negotiation between real and unreal space is manifested by the embodied symbolisms of the colour, locating the body as a material

³⁴ Foucault, 231.

³⁵ Wen Lee, “Journey of a Yellow Man No. 1” artist statement for City Polytechnic, London, 1992.

site while suspending it in the immaterial realms of diaspora, the Orient, and Singaporean hyper-racialisation. Yeo (2023) notes Lee's use of 'old country'³⁶ in the accompanying essay for *Journey of a Yellow Man No. 5* as 'a tart acknowledgement that yellow is not just the colour of his painted skin but also 'the' country, a specific space of prior rootedness, and to Qing-era, pre-revolutionary China.'³⁷ However, the unnatural, exaggerated and disjunct rendering of his skin might emphasise that this 'old country' itself is but a phantom space, a space that he simultaneously embodies and disembodies through his Yellow caricature. The Yellow is 'an entirely enigmatic language', turning the Man into a 'fragment of imaginary space'. If 'everything that touches the body—drawings, colors, diadems, tiara, clothes, uniforms, all that—lets the utopias sealed in the body blossom into sensible and colourful form', 'reach[ing] the flesh itself' of the Yellow Man would allow us to see how the body would be 'like the product of its own phantasms'.³⁸

Becoming non-self

We can extend the utopian reading of Lee's work through the interweaving of Foucauldian and Daoist thought. The key argument Foucault deploys to postulate the body as 'the principal actor in all utopias' is that it has 'no place', that it is at once 'here' and 'elsewhere'. Similarly, Daoist doctrine centres heavily on the idea of the non-self. The non-self refers to the process of decentering the self³⁹, and is crucial to the mediation and ultimate dissolution of the ego-self to achieve self-transcendence. However, the 'non' in non-self does not imply that there is no self at stake: Daoism acknowledges the presence of a self. Instead, the non-self is an ideology that eradicates the 'absolute opposite of the two

³⁶ Wen Lee. "Journey of a Yellow Man No.5: Index to Freedoms", artist statement for 4th Asian Art Show, Fukuoka Art Museum, 10 October 1994.

³⁷ Xuan Yeo, "Yellow Temporalities: Time is out of joint in the diaspora", BA diss., Goldsmiths, University of London, 2023.

³⁸ Michel Foucault. "Utopian Body," in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2006), 229-234: 231.

³⁹ David Y. F. Ho, "Selfhood and Identity in Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism: Contrasts With the West," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 25, no. 2 (June 1, 1995): 115–39, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5914.1995.tb00269.x>.

aspects of the matter (such as the presence or absence of the two phases)'. In short, it disavows the binary oppositions deeply entrenched in Western systems of thought.

Thus, once we have recognized our self-centred and subjective state, the only Way or Dao, corresponds to actively allowing ourselves to flow in the direction of the non-self and 'our' opposite, instead of clinging as forcefully as we usually do, to 'our' actual state of being. [...] This is precisely why, in the plane of the transcendence of the self, the non-self, and hence equanimity, is so critical. [...] [It dissolves] for us the boundaries of both of those states, to let us live them as their opposite; the quotidian, 'material' life as the absolute, spiritual realm, and those 'spiritual' peaks, openings and experiences, as the most radically immediate, material and concrete.⁴⁰

Could we not draw explicit relations between the ideas described in the text above and Foucault's definition of the utopian body? The non-self necessitates a detachment from our 'actual state of being', instead living 'material' and 'spiritual' life interchangeably, simultaneously, borderlessly and in entanglement. Does this not echo Foucault's utopian body as '[u]ntethered, invisible, protected—always transfigured'? One of the ways the non-self can be activated is in the realm of suffering: Zhuangzi, credited with writing one of two foundational texts of Daoism, states that 'all the troubles of human life arise from an obsessive sense of 'I'.⁴¹ It is possible to conceive the non-self as a utopian practice when we consider how utopias may be born from the pained, strained body⁴². Elaine Scarry astutely observes that pain is 'of all states the one that, by its aversiveness, makes most pressing the urge to move out and away from the body.' By engaging with the body imaginatively, Lee's bodily

⁴⁰ Camilo Andrés Hoyos Lozano, "An Ontological Critique of the Self: The Daoist 'Non-self' at the Heart of Jung's Analytical Theory" (2020). *Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository*. 7169. <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/7169>

⁴¹ Puqun Li, *A Guide to Asian Philosophy Classics* (Broadview Press, 2012).

⁴² Dominique Roux and Russell W. Belk, "The Body as (Another) Place: Producing Embodied Heterotopias Through Tattooing," *the Journal of Consumer Research/Journal of Consumer Research* 46, no. 3 (December 19, 2018): 483–507, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucy081>.

transfiguration allows him to transcend the ‘same presence, same wounds’⁴³. The ‘wholly passive and helpless occurrence’ of the body that Foucault first describes is reconfigured ‘into a self-modifying and, when most successful, self-eliminating one’⁴⁴. This ‘self-eliminating’ desire of the utopian body resounds with the practice of non-self: As Lozano (2020) rightly puts it: ‘For problems or suffering to be meaningful, or even effective, they necessitate the platform of being and the self. Without them, worries have nowhere to act. In a Daoist perspective, the abandonment of the own person is the requirement for perfect equanimity, which is the only comprehensive antidote for suffering.’ Lee channels this thinking into his work through the repetitive motions in his performance. The non-self does not exert effort into reaching specific goals, his focus is on the non-doing (無為 wúwéi): a central Daoist principle which involves acting without desire, where desire is understood as the force that causes people and things to behave unnaturally⁴⁵. The video documentation of Lee’s work shows Lee grappling with the chains, walking and moving around in circles, repeating the motions over and over again over an extended duration. It becomes obvious that Lee is being moved by the moment. His movements are slow, disjointed and nonsequential: meaning they are not performed in an order that might suggest an unravelling of linear time. His intentional pause after any action breaks up the viewer’s individual temporalities as well as the temporality of the space that he inhabits, and Lee’s blank stare erases any trace of an affirmed ego. We begin to understand the Yellow Man before us as a vessel, a generator of utopias.

In Daoism, a more viable cosmological understanding is one based on becoming rather than on being.⁴⁶ The corporeal body is much less antagonised in Eastern doctrines compared to Western ones of ‘sin, incarnation and resurrection’. Daoist thought promotes a ‘mind-body holism’ that counters the hierarchy of mind over body in Western rationalism. As Dorothy Ko (2005) points out:

⁴³ Michel Foucault. “Utopian Body,” in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2006), 229-234: 229.

⁴⁴ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1985).

⁴⁵ “Wu-wei - New World Encyclopedia,” n.d., <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Wu-wei>.

⁴⁶ Camilo Andrés Hoyos Lozano, “An Ontological Critique of the Self: The Daoist ‘Non-self’ at the Heart of Jung’s Analytical Theory” (2020). *Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository*. 7169. <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/7169>

To think about bodies in utopia is to think about thresholds and journeys across thresholds. Instead of an idealised order in its totality, our point of departure is the body-in-motion, always in the process of making and breaking boundaries. According to this view, one does not so much acquire or 'have' a body but 'becomes' a body. In placing the body and processes at the heart of our thinking we may envision utopia with new eyes.⁴⁷

While the idea of 'being' a body might indicate 'the mechanical view of a pre-shaped body moving through a stationary environment', 'becoming' a body 'envision[s] bodily practices that create utopian spaces by making and remaking the social world, in the process of which the body is also remade or overcome.' As highlighted in the title of Lee's work, what is important is not the Yellow Man himself but the fact that he is *journeying*. His body is always moving between space-time, destabilising spatial temporalities wherever he goes. As Lee repeats his motions, his 'identity slips in and out of states'⁴⁸: this body-in-flux is precisely what Foucault posits as 'the body is nowhere'.

By considering Lee Wen's *Journey of a Yellow Man No. 1* alongside Foucault's 'Utopian Bodies', Lee's work emerges as a site in which the body as a generator of utopias is successfully manifested. When thinking of the body as utopia, it is essential to consider the body across thresholds, be it through the act of painting oneself yellow or by physically undertaking motions of repetition to rid the self-ego. Lee's Yellow Man would continue to journey on for the next twenty years across multiple continents. For Lee, his utopia began 'at the heart of the world, this small utopian kernel' from which he dreamt, walked, breathed, and performed. As a fellow Singaporean-Chinese student in London marked by the same Yellowness of the Yellow Man, it is his embodiment of utopia that I will carry with me. It is, perhaps, my turn to Journey.

⁴⁷ Dorothy Ko, "Chapter 6 Bodies in Utopia and Utopian Bodies in Imperial China," in *Berghahn Books*, 2022, 89–103, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781782382027-008>.

⁴⁸ Xuan Yeo, "Yellow Temporalities: Time is out of joint in the diaspora", BA diss., Goldsmiths, University of London, 2023.

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Figure 3. Film still of Lee Wen, Journey of a Yellow Man No.1, 1992. London, United Kingdom. Video courtesy of Sean Fairman and Asia Art Archive.



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Figure 6. Film still of Lee Wen, Journey of a Yellow Man No.1, 1992. London, United Kingdom. Video courtesy of Sean Fairman and Asia Art Archive.



Figure 7. Film still of Lee Wen, Journey of a Yellow Man No.1, 1992. London, United Kingdom. Video courtesy of Sean Fairman and Asia Art Archive.

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